



A Grassroots Battle to Save Mali's Elephants

By Dr Susan Canney and Vance Martin

In 2003 conservationists launched a program to discover more about a unique and enigmatic herd of “desert elephants” on the southern border of the Malian Sahara. The herd is on the move most of the year, seeking water, food and refuge from human activity. In light of the Africa-wide surge in poaching, combined with the recent Tuareg rebellion and jihadist insurgency in Mali, just how have these impressive creatures survived?

Elephant poaching in Mali was a rarity before January 2012, but the presence of heavily-armed Tuareg mercenaries returning from Libya's civil war exacerbated, if it did not create the current crisis. After the collapse of government in Northern and Central Mali, separatist and jihadist groups were able to occupy vastly populated areas without hindrance.

At the same time elephant poaching has escalated across the country, fueled by conflict and international trafficking networks that capitalize on high ivory prices, mainly driven by Asian demand.

Cameroon's Bouba Njida National Park had lost 650 elephants in the first two and half months of 2012, and with an estimated 550 individuals, the unprotected Mali desert herd was under serious threat.

Since 2007, the Mali Elephant Project (MEP) has brought together the diverse clans and ethnicities populating the elephant range to develop a model of community empowerment, whereby local people benefit from elephant conservation. Joint efforts have ▶



The Mali Elephant Project (MEP) is an initiative of WILD Foundation and the International Conservation Fund of Canada. The MEP is also a Tusk Trust project and receives funding from a range of donors including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the UK Government's Darwin Initiative and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and the MINUSMA (the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali).

Numbering around 300-500 the elephants make an annual circular migration over a vast, remote area of 32,000km². It is the longest such migration in the world. It is also the most unusual, as the elephants spend over 95% of their time in "concentration areas" of important habitat, and move rapidly between them along fixed migration corridors.

See more at: www.wild.org/mali-elephants

established systems of natural resource management (water, pasture and forests), which protect local livelihoods and the elephants' habitat whilst also reversing degradation. Without these efforts the herd would be well on the way to eradication, if not already gone.

In each community, respected Malian elders are elected to constitute a committee that determines the rules of resource use - including the protection of elephant habitat - for the area under their jurisdiction. Teams of young men patrol to ensure compliance with these rules, report infringements and conduct activities such as planting trees and building fire-breaks to protect pasture and ensure livestock has food throughout the long dry season. The livestock managed by these communities fetch on average an additional 50% in market, as they are healthier

and give more milk. Forests are protected from clearance and cutting (largely by outsiders), enabling the sale of natural products (hay, resins, medicines, forage and wild foods) in local markets.

At the onset of conflict in 2012, locals were dismayed by how

little persuasion many young men needed to join rogue armed groups. With an all-Malian field team, the MEP was able to continue to operate through the conflict and use the systems already in place to extend its model of youth engagement. It recruited 520 unarmed, local young men across an area the size of Switzerland to watch out for elephant killings, discover the identities of poachers, as well as protect resources.

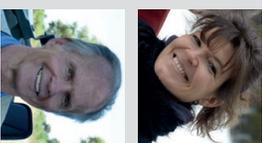
Although jihadists paid \$30-50/day and the MEP only paid in food, none of the recruits

defected to armed groups because they understood their duties to be beneficial for the whole community. As a result, the elephant range only lost six elephants during the 2012-13 conflict.

Orchestrated by the French military in 2013, Operation Serval broke the hold of the armed groups in the region, but the government failed to restore security. Many of the youth recruited to armed groups refused to return to their communities due to shame or out of fear of being handed over to the authorities, all of which left them vulnerable to further radicalization. Despite this, the numbers of community "eco-guardians" swelled to over 600, and during the first three years only 20 elephants were killed. Supporting these eco-guardians costs the MEP around \$100,000-120,000 per year. Ultimately all of these systems will become self-sustaining, as some already are; however, the dislocation created

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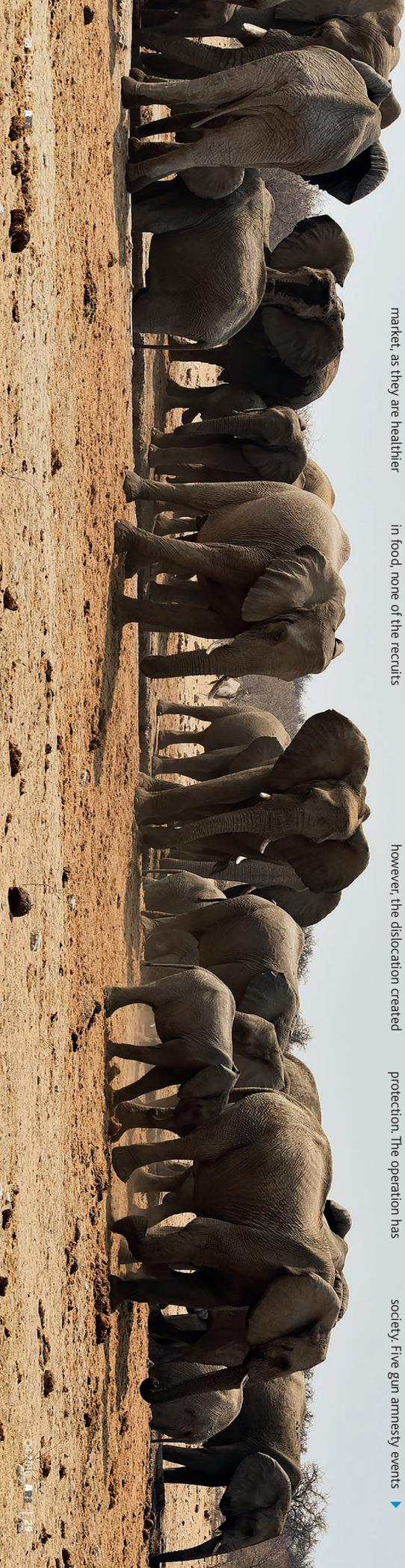
by ongoing insecurity means other communities across Mali urgently require the MEP's expertise.

At the beginning of 2015, external trafficking networks sought to recruit locals. Security deteriorated and 64 elephants were killed in the first half of the year. The tragedy is further compounded by the fact that desert elephants' ivory is of poor quality, fractured and broken by the arid conditions. Immediate action was required, and MEP engaged the military to support local communities in elephant protection. The operation has

reduced the rate of poaching by two thirds, and the MEP is supporting the government to create a dedicated anti-poaching unit.

Last year's landmark Malian peace deal aimed to settle conflict between Bamako and Tuareg rebels in the northern region. Yet armed conflict is rising at an alarming rate in central Mali, which is home to part of the elephant range.

The deal implements the disarmament and demobilization of militias, and the reintegration of ex-fighters into society. Five gun amnesty events





The ivory poaching crisis has its roots mainly in increased demand in Asia, with about 70% of illegal ivory ultimately destined for China.

The latest crisis began in the early 2000s following indications that the ban might be lifted, which led to a surge in poaching around 2005-2006. The multi-billion dollar industry has attracted organized criminal networks and gangs that export the ivory from Africa.

Some suggest that poaching would be limited if a regulated supply of ivory could be made available from that gathered from the stockpiling of tusks from culls and natural deaths. A large one-off sale of legal ivory (taken from elephants that died naturally) to China in 2008 hoped to prevent poaching, by lowering prices and making the industry less profitable - but recent research shows how this plan backfired catastrophically. It reduced the stigma of ivory, thereby causing a dramatic increase in elephant killing, boosting demand and providing cover for the laundering of illegal ivory.



have been set up in the elephant range but the process has been slow and relatively ineffective. Non-fighters have purchased weaponry in hope of receiving public sector opportunities, while delays in the process have meant the number of numbers assembling at these sites has grown, fuelling conflict between ethnicities and militias.

It is unlikely that the Malian government can fully deliver upon expectations. If there are no alternatives available for disenfranchised youth, recruitment and radicalization will retain their draw. Despite incentives, many are still reluctant to take up arms,

suggesting the MEP alternative is viable.

In the Gourma region of Mali, MEP's aim is to offer individuals a pragmatic alternative to terrorism. With multiple proven benefits, this model is by far the most cost-effective security and stability initiative available. Uniting clans and ethnicities around a common cause – improving livelihoods, reversing habitat degradation and restoring ecosystem resilience – stabilizes and empowers local communities and promotes reconciliation. As one eco-guard said, "spending days building fire-breaks together, sharing food around a fire at night, you realize everyone has the same problems."

More Information

Website: <http://www.wild.org/mali-elephants/>

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